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CHARLES BURLEIGH PURVIS (See Cover)

DR. CHARLES BURLEIGH PURVIS, whose cover portrait on this issue of the *Journal* was drawn by our staff artist, MRS. NAIDA WILLETTE PAGE, was the second Negro appointed to the faculty of the Howard University College of Medicine, his appointment on March 15, 1869 having followed that of Dr. Alexander T. Augusta by six months. He was, therefore, the second Negro to become a teacher in an American medical school. His place in medical history rests most significantly upon the fact that during the national financial panic of 1873, he was chiefly responsible for preventing the closing of the Howard Medical School, although many additional contributions were a source of strength to the institution. As one of the physicians who attended PRESIDENT JAMES A. GARFIELD following the attack of the assassin, he is the only Negro physician to have served a president of the United States. With DR. AUGUSTA and DR. A. W. TUCKER, Dr. Purvis was one of three Negro physicians who applied for admission to the Medical Society of the District of Columbia on June 9, 1869 and were rejected solely on account of race, the first recorded instance of such rejection by a constituent society of the American Medical Association.¹

Dr. Purvis was physically a handsome man of imposing stature and commanding presence. He had a strong and dynamic personality, a keen intellect and an affable manner. He was a fluent and eloquent speaker and was throughout his career a controversial figure. He died in 1929 at the ripe age of 87. Fifty-seven of his years were devoted to service to the local medical center and Howard University. From 1869 to 1873 he served the School as professor of materia medica and therapeutics and from 1873 to 1906 as professor of obstetrics and gynecology. He was secretary of the faculty from 1873 to 1896 and president of the faculty from 1899 to 1900. In 1900 he was elected dean of the Medical School but declined the post. For sixteen years, 1908 to 1926, he served on the Board of Trustees of Howard University. On retirement he was made an honorary trustee for life.

Dr. Purvis was born April 14, 1842, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the son of ROBERT and HARRIET PURVIS. As his father was well-to-do, young Purvis received an

adequate preparatory education. He attended Oberlin College from 1860 to 1863 and was graduated from Wooster Medical College, now Western Reserve Medical School, in Cleveland, in 1865. In June of the same year he came to Washington, D. C., with a commission as Acting Assistant Surgeon in the United States Army.

Dr. Purvis served in the Army until 1869, when he became Assistant Surgeon of Freedmen's Hospital. This post he held until his promotion to Surgeon-in-Chief in 1881. He resigned the position as Surgeon-in-Chief in 1894, because of the election of Grover Cleveland. He was succeeded by another physician important in the annals of Negro medical history, DR. DANIEL HALE WILLIAMS, whose appointment was regarded as political from the Democratic party, and was the first instance of attempts to make a political plum of the directorship of Freedmen's Hospital.

The Medical Department was supported entirely by Howard University from 1868 to 1873. During the financial panic of 1873 Howard University suffered along with other educational institutions. In the necessary curtailing of expenses, the professors of the Medical Department were notified that their salaries could no longer be paid by the University and therefore their resignations were requested. The professors' resignations were received June 3, 1873. The Trustees of the University reelected the same instructors at the same salaries, but would not guarantee payment. All receipts of the Medical Department were to be pro-rated.²

Only three of the professors accepted reappointment.* They were DR. CHARLES B. PURVIS, DR. A. T. AUGUSTA and DR. G. S. PALMER. On July 1, 1873, these three met in what Dyson³ has termed the most momentous meeting of the medical faculty to this day. They decided to carry on. Purvis was the wheel horse.

The withdrawal of University support made the future of the Medical Department very dark. Dr. Purvis was given permission by the University to continue the Medical Department provided he did not obligate the Trustees of Howard University for any debts. As Secretary Pro-Tem of the Medical Department he went to DOCTORS NEIL F. GRAHAM, THOMAS B. HOOD and DANIEL S. LAMB and pleaded with them to help carry on the Medical Department. These unselfish men realized the situation and pledged their help. These men, outstanding in their profession and the community, kept the doors of the Medical Department open.

They had a courage seldom found today, for they faced ostracism by their friends and associates because they were willing to teach colored students. In spite of obstacles, discouragements and constant criticism, they never swerved from their purpose. This group was known as the Senior Faculty of the Medical Department and assumed the educational as well as the financial responsibilities of the school. At the end of the school year, after all debts were paid, they divided any balance that was

* Lamb states that Dr. William C. Tilden also accepted reappointment. The record does not indicate any further service by the latter.

left equally among themselves. It is to be emphasized, however, that whatever balances accrued at that day were very meager and of little financial significance to the professors who had to rely on other sources for their incomes. It has even been reported that Dr. Purvis did not himself accept any of the small allowance accruing from fees.

It is worthy of note that the University did not further contribute to the support of the medical school as one of the constituent departments of the University until 1922. It did, however, annually allot to the school the sum of approximately \$750.00 which was the income from a capital of \$15,000 acquired by the University from the sale of the ground on which the Macmillan reservoir is now located.

Following the reorganization of the Medical Department in 1873, Dr. Purvis was elected secretary of the faculty and continued in this position until 1896 when he resigned and was succeeded by DR. FURMAN J. SHADD. As stated, Dr. Purvis served as president of the medical faculty from 1899 to 1900 and was elected dean of the school in 1900, but declined this honor.

One of the major controversies in which Dr. Purvis was a participant involved a struggle within the Board of Trustees for control of Howard University. The contending forces appeared to have been church influence, as represented by the American Missionary Association and the First Congregational Church of Washington, and advocates of independent status with strong Negro representation. The issue came to a head on efforts to have John Mercer Langston elected the first Negro president of Howard University. Langston was the choice of Gen. Oliver O. Howard to succeed the latter as president of the University in 1874. Langston was the choice of all the Negroes on the Board, of the students and of the Negroes of the United States in general. Nevertheless, he was defeated. Two white men who did not serve, GEORGE WHIPPLE and EDWARD P. SMITH, both secretaries of the American Missionary Association, were chosen in succession. The failure to elect Langston, who was acting president, together with the financial panic of 1873, disrupted the University. Langston resigned in 1875 and with him the faculty of law.³

Frederick Douglass, then a trustee, entered the affray on Langston's side in the public print. Although the record available does not show it, Purvis apparently had joined in public criticism of the Board and apparently had been under pressure to resign from the school along with Langston, et al.

This is deduced from the fact that a statement of Dr. Purvis was published in the New York Evening Post for July 10, 1875, to the effect that while he had been among those who had worked for Langston's success, he was not willing to see the University wrecked to gratify disappointed ambition and revenge because Langston was not elected. Purvis said of the American Missionary Association that the allegation of its ambition to control Howard University was a pure invention, that it had done more toward the education of the Negro than all other organizations combined. Purvis further

stated that Langston's defeat was really due to the colored trustees because of the severe criticism they frequently passed upon him to their associates.³

In 1903 the question of a new municipal hospital for the District of Columbia was being discussed in Congress. Some of the legislators were in favor of closing Freedmen's Hospital and caring for the charity patients in the new hospital. No one realized more than Dr. Purvis what a catastrophe such a step would be for the Medical Department of Howard University. He knew that no medical school can function properly without the facilities of a hospital. Once again he came to the front and threw himself into the fray. He pleaded with his friends in Congress and as a result on March 3, 1903, an appropriation of \$300,000 was approved for the erection of a hospital and accessories on the grounds of Howard University. The University authorities fought a delaying action to prevent the erection of a building on the ground named in the appropriation. It would have meant a loss of \$4,000 a year in rent that the University was receiving for the use of the buildings and ground. The Department of Interior fought the provision which required Howard University to provide the medical and surgical services for the new hospital. Dr. Purvis was largely responsible for the defeat of the latter proposal. After a long delay and new legislation, the new hospital was erected on ground that had been given to the District of Columbia in lieu of taxes. The land in question was given back to Howard University on the condition that it be leased to the Government for \$1 a year for ninety-nine years.

Dr. Purvis was active in the civic as well as the professional life of the Washington community. He served on the Board of Education and the Board of Health of the District of Columbia and is the only Negro physician known to have served on the Board of Medical Examiners of the District of Columbia, of which he was a member from 1897 to 1904.

In 1904, Dr. Purvis passed the Massachusetts State Board examinations and was licensed to practice medicine and surgery in that state. In the same year, he was admitted to the Massachusetts Medical Society. In 1905 he went to Boston to live and this city remained his official residence until his death on December 14, 1929. He was one of the earliest recipients of pensions given teachers by the Carnegie Foundation and enjoyed one in the sum of \$2,000 per annum from 1905 until his demise in 1929.

On April 13, 1871, Dr. Purvis married Miss ANN HATHAWAY of Easport, Maine, who happened to be white. They had two children, Alice, who became a physician and Robert, a dentist.

The nature of Dr. Purvis marriage excited certain bilateral public comment and hostility. It would appear that in 1901, Dr. Purvis sought to become Surgeon-in-Chief of Freedmen's for the second time. An editorial in the Colored American, a contemporary Negro newspaper, wrote in opposition that Dr. Purvis had had his chance and that, "... since the place is allotted to the Negro it ought to go to the worthiest Negro who is not

ashamed to acknowledge his identification with his people."

It is also known that Dr. Purvis aspired to run for public office, but the Negro political bosses, powerful in Washington at that time, are said to have passed him over because he was too much of a "swell."

While undoubtedly neither of the above inferences was true, the instances do contribute to the picture of the type of controversial figure the man was and the nature of some of the social forces with which he had to contend.

The following letter from Dr. Purvis to PRESIDENT THIRKIELD of Howard University is reproduced in full both for its value as an eye-witness account of the early history of Freedmen's Hospital and as showing the nature of Dr. Purvis' interest and activities on behalf of the institution.

Boston, Mass.—December 11, 1908

Mr. Wilbur P. Thirkield,
President of Howard University,
Washington, D. C.

My dear Sir:

A bill drawn by the Assistant Secretary of the Interior, (Mr. Ryan) in February last relating to the management of the Freedmen's Hospital, and which was sent to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and referred to the Committee on the District of Columbia, together with a report to the Secretary of the Interior by the board of visitors of said hospital, came to me today. I have read the bill and the report carefully, and deem it best to review the same. They appear to be disingenuous.

That you may be thoroughly acquainted with the facts I will give you a short history of the Freedmen's Hospital.

It was originally known as "The Contraband Camp." In 1862 thousands of contrabands found their way into Washington. Owing to their poverty and unhoused conditions they were collected into camps and lived in tents. Large numbers became ill and it was necessary to make some provision for them. DR. DANIEL BREED, a philanthropic gentleman, secured an old house on what is known as Capitol Hill. Here the sick were attended. Owing to increased numbers larger quarters became necessary. Barracks were constructed in the north-western part of the city on R Street between 12th and 13th Streets.

The Camp was under the control of the War Department. It placed in command a Captain Barker and the place was known for some years as Camp Barker, but was subsequently called Freedmen's Hospital.

In 1864 the hospital was moved to quarters located on Vermont Avenue and M Streets. In 1865, after the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau, the hospital was transferred from the War Department to the Bureau. In August 1864 Campbell Hospital which was located on the grounds of Le Droit Park became vacant. The buildings were placed under the control of the Freedmen's Bureau and the Freedmen's Hospital was transferred to their building. In 1867 the Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau erected the present hospital buildings, which are located on Pomeroy Street. There was a two-fold object in erecting these buildings; first, to give better and modern conveniences to the hospital patients; second, to place the hospital in close relations to the medical department of Howard University, which had then been established.

In 1867 the Secretary of War, General Rawlins, acting under authority given him by Congress, transferred the hospital building and grounds permanently to Howard University for educational purposes.

In 1871 the Freedmen's Bureau with its several depart-

ments was placed directly under the War Department. It soon became evident to the professors of the medical department and the trustees of Howard University that instruction in the medical college could not be as liberally conducted under said department as it could be under some other. They desired to have a transfer made, so when the appropriation for the War Department was under consideration I waited upon General Garfield, who was chairman of the committee on appropriations in the House of Representatives, and asked him to make provisions in the bill for transferring the Freedmen's Hospital to the Department of the Interior. I explained to him the reasons fully, to wit: That Howard University had a Medical College; to maintain it was of paramount importance; that it should control as far as possible the work of the Hospital. General Garfield having a higher appreciation of the objects, aims and purposes of the University conceded to the proposition. The desired transfer was made, it being understood that in the appointing of a Surgeon-in-Chief the interests of Howard University should be considered. This was in 1871. General Benjamin F. Butler, then a member of the House of Representatives, offered an amendment to the appropriation bill, when the item for the Freedmen's Hospital was under consideration, forbidding it to receive any new patients after the next fiscal year. I waited on General O. O. Howard and had him in turn see General Butler and explain matters, which he did. Mr. Butler then withdrew his amendment and the Hospital was placed under the Department of the Interior.

At the instance of Howard University a change was made in the office of the Surgeon-in-Chief. Prof. Gideon S. Palmer, M.D., was placed in charge. He held the position for several years and kept the institution closely identified with the medical college. I succeeded him. I was tendered the appointment by President Garfield who was anxious to see the medical college progress. He was assassinated before I received my commission. The Secretary of the Interior, Mr. Kirkland, called President Arthur's attention to the fact that President Garfield desired me to hold the position, and to the additional fact that I was the first physician to attend the President after he was shot. President Arthur wishing to recognize my service to his predecessor as well as to carry out the wish of President Garfield ordered my appointment.

I held the position for over thirteen years when I was removed by the Secretary of the Interior, Mr. Hoke Smith, of Georgia, for political reasons. A Democrat was appointed to succeed me. This was the first time the institution was made a political one. Argument, and the fact that it was transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior by the influence of the representatives of Howard University, had no effect. The claims of the university were ignored. The new Surgeon-in-Chief caused much trouble as he persistently sought to force himself into the faculty of the college to be a professor of surgery and made it quite clear that unless his ambition was gratified the college could not expect very many advantages or favors from the hospital. He was not equipped for the work of a *teacher in any sense*. He was arbitrary, and wilfully he destroyed a training school for nurses established by the college and started another. He served four years and was succeeded by a Dr. Curtis.

That the hospital should be removed from political influence if the medical department was to survive; if the sons and daughters of ten million of colored people were to have opportunities for studying medicine, pharmacy, and dentistry was clear. This fact was brought to the attention of the chairman of the committee on appropriations in both the House and the Senate. As a result a joint resolution was passed providing for a committee of the two Houses to investigate all hospitals and asylums in the District of Columbia that were supported in whole or in part by the Government that were charitable in their character. Senator McMillan was made chairman. The various hospitals and asylums were thoroughly considered. That the Freedmen's Hospital buildings were unfit for further use was clear to the committee. The idea of establishing a municipal hospital was

strongly urged. Plans were conceived for the erection of one that would cost between three and four millions of dollars. The committee considered what relation the medical department of Howard University would have to this municipal institution. Would its corps of professors be thoroughly recognized and appreciated? Senator McMillan came to the conclusion, and so did the members of his committee, that as a matter of simple justice there should be a modest hospital constructed over which the Howard University should have control.

The Senator died before his plans were carried into effect. I then took the matter up and brought it before the committee of appropriations of the Senate and House and the two committees on the District of Columbia. With these committees I lobbied to secure an appropriation for a new hospital. I gave them my reasons based upon the fact that our students were excluded from all other hospitals. It was not a new thought for me after ten years I had been wrestling with this subject before Congress. After much argument, and personal interviewing with members and senators, I succeeded in getting an appropriation of three hundred thousand dollars upon the following conditions, to wit:

That Howard University would relinquish its rent; that it should furnish the ground; that it should conform to the practice existing in Washington, and throughout all the large cities in the country and furnish the medical surgical staffs, who would serve without salary. These concessions the University made.

The three hundred thousand was appropriated (a large sum, sufficient for the construction of such buildings as were desired).

In securing the appropriation for the new hospital the Department of the Interior took no part and manifested no interest. The District of Columbia authorities in a way were opposed to the scheme as it might interfere with their municipal hospital idea.

The question is, will the contract made by Howard University and the Government be carried out? Should the Interior Department be absolute over that which it had no hand in creating? Should the hospital again become a subject for political aspiration? Should the great scheme for educating the millions of our population whose opportunities in life are extremely meagre be placed in jeopardy? Is there any reason why the Government should expend hundreds of thousand dollars on the Providence, Garfield, Children's Hospitals, and others, without being willing to mete out to Howard University the same consideration? These hospitals are not under the control of any Department and yet they receive annual appropriations. There is no friction between them and the Government and there will be none between the Freedmen's and the Government if there is a broad, liberal, and catholic spirit manifested by those who seek control.

What does Howard University want with a hospital? Why should it make large concessions of grounds, etc., to secure one unless it is to carry out its comprehensive educational policy?

I regret to see that the contract for the erection of the new building has exceeded the appropriation. This is not the blunder of the University. If the medical faculty, composed as it is of trained men most of whom have had large hospital experience, had been taken into the confidence of the Department of the Interior as it was tacitly understood it would be, the present blunder would not exist. It is owing to lack of experience in matters of this kind. It is easy for Mr. Evans in his report to say there is no logical reason why Howard University should control Freedmen's Hospital. His inability to see the logic of Howard's contention is a result of his inexperience and ignorance of the facts and history concerning the Hospital. There never was any friction between the District of Columbia and the general government over the management of the institution. The im-

pression that friction existed was the result of the strained construction of the law made by the Department of the Interior. It assumed the illogical position of allowing the District of Columbia to make all contracts for rent, subsistence, etc., and denied it the right to make contracts for hire. And yet the law expressly stated the District should have supervision over all expenditures. Mr. Smith, as Secretary of the Interior, desired to control the political feature while releasing himself of all other burdens. In the language of Sen. Allison, chairman of the committee on appropriations for the Senate, "There must be no slipping of the cog; your institution must have all the profits to be derived from the new hospital."

Thinking, Mr. President, this short history may be of some advantage to you, as you are unacquainted with the facts, I have taken the liberty of writing them out.

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) C. B. PURVIS

The history of Howard University, especially the Medical Department and Freedmen's Hospital, would have been a different story had it not been for the professional contributions made by Dr. Purvis. Destiny must have seen in him a competent agent.

On February 4, 1930 the Board of Trustees of Howard University passed the following resolution concerning Dr. Purvis.

Memorial — Dr. Purvis

This Board has learned with deep sorrow of the death of one of its most valued members, DR. CHARLES B. PURVIS, who has rendered important service to Howard University from its infancy both as a member of the Medical Faculty and as an active and leading member of this Board of Trustees. In its deliberations his wide experience and ripe scholarship have always proven most valuable assets. His leadership and counsel were always an invaluable help to the work of this Board.

Therefore, be it resolved, that in his passing the Board has sustained a great loss; the Medical Department a strong supporter, one of rarely constructive moral force, and the country, a law-abiding and useful citizen.

A handsome oil portrait of Dr. Purvis by HALLOWELL LOUD, dated 1907, now hangs as the centerpiece among replicas of distinguished former members of the faculty in the foyer of the Howard Medical School.

W. M. C.

N. B.: The Editor is deeply grateful to DR. WILLIAM C. McNEILL, emeritus professor of gynecology of Howard University, for an original draft of the manuscript and many materials used in the above account. Dr. McNeill's autobiography, now nearing publication, will hold vital interest for all interested in the development of the Negro physician in the United States.

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